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For a Multicultural Europe: as Seen from the East

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Carneci, Magda. *Art et pouvoir en Roumanie : 1945-1989*, Paris : L'Harmattan, 2007, (Aujourd'hui l'Europe)
Culture tchèque des années 60, Paris : L'Harmattan : Centre tchèque, 2007

- 1 In spite of a growing interest in East European art (i.e. central and eastern), otherwise put, art produced in countries that have recently joined the European Union, there is a major lopsidedness between publications and knowledge to do with western and eastern European cultures. This imbalance is diminishing, but we are still a long way from a state of equilibrium. Let us nevertheless recall several conspicuous exhibitions—and major catalogues—organized after the fall of the Berlin Wall, in 1989—such as Europa-Europa in Bonn (1994), Der Riss im Raum in Berlin (1995), After the Wall in Stockholm (1999), Beyond Belief in Chicago (1995), Reduktivismus in Vienna (1992), and Central European Avant-gardes: Exchange and Transformation in Los Angeles (2002).
- 2 Western museum collections are acquiring more and more works by East European artists, but this is not reflected in the way works are hung: here the established canon has not changed. One particular factor plays a significant role in our knowledge about East European culture: it involves the numerous symposia and conferences—accompanied by publications—and the many festivals organized on a grand scale as part of a system of international exchanges (the various “Hungarian”, “Czech” and “Polish” years in France, for example), and regional programmes which are highly successful among local audiences. Nevertheless, knowledge in the West about the contemporary culture of that “other” Europe is still far from sufficient—even when you look at the quality and quantity of historical research, and overall and methodological studies published in the various

languages of the East European countries (Mária Oriskova, Lóránd Hegyi, Piotr Piotrowski...). We should also note a massive delay where translation is concerned.

- 3 It is still a major fact that, in Eastern and Western Europe alike, we see the survival (in particular in books for the layman and in university handbooks) of the much criticized model of a culture where the West is the centre and the East the periphery. We should not forget that East European art historians and critics also have trouble getting around the traditional dichotomy between the desire, on the one hand, to express their European aspirations through a universalist vision of culture and, on the other, conversely, to seek out national histories in local cultures which are independent of universal processes. The changes that are being outlined today in scientific approaches and methods are heading in the direction of a rejection of old-style historiosophy and the construction of a multicultural vision of Europe, at once dynamic and asynchronic, within which relations between East-West/North-South, geography and history, and art and politics are becoming more complex and differentiated. Needless to say, this recent prospect raises methodological issues and calls for a novel way of looking at historical documents. In this context, it is thus worth noting the importance of two books that have recently been published in French about Czech culture in the 1960s and Rumanian art in the period 1945 to 1989.
- 4 *Culture tchèque des années 60* is a collection of writings published by Michael Wellner-Pospíšil, a film-maker well-known in Parisian circles, and currently director of the Czech Institute in Paris, and Jean-Gaspard Páleníček, man of letters, actor and director. The authors of the various essays are Czech researchers working in Prague and Paris. The book focuses on a short period of contemporary Czech history, between 1963 and 1968: the period of the political "thaw" that went hand-in-hand with a cultural blossoming (in literature, painting, theatre, music, film, philosophy and architecture). The quality and distinctive nature of this book involve the way it constantly goes beyond preordained chronological boundaries, which has in turn enabled the authors to demonstrate cultural processes at work in the general dynamic of postwar Czech history (it is a pity that the problem of Slovak culture, developed within the same state structure, is treated in a secondary way). Because of this, the brief period of research into "socialism with a human face" goes beyond the local context and the level of just one generation. The book also interestingly shows the way Czech art was received in France. By upending the traditional model (French culture: source of Czech culture), the book underscores the contextual complexity of East-West relations (which is tantamount to saying that western culture must take eastern culture into consideration, in order to understand its own dynamic).
- 5 *Art et pouvoir en Roumanie : 1945-1989* is the work of Magda Carneci, a poetess and art historian, currently director of the Rumanian Institute in Paris. This most important book is an analysis of the complex mechanisms governing the absence of freedom (and independence) of art during the different periods of Communist rule ("Socialist realism and Stalin cult", "Normalization", "Nationalism and Ceaucescu cult"). In it, historical analysis of the development of art in Rumania is based on a precise research method. M. Carneci is well aware that research in the field of plastic arts in countries in the Communist camp poses art historians a complex problem to do with a choice of outlooks. On the one hand, art historical research tools turn out to be of little practical use for analysing the relations between art and ideology. On the other hand, the fact of adopting a purely political viewpoint leaves art historians with a sense of dissatisfaction with regard to knowledge of the mechanisms whereby art structures are constructed, and

function. The author favours a “political scientist’s” line of thinking (about political ideologies) by trying to “sociologize” her history of art (cultural strategies). Consequently, the book contains more general historical analyses than it does analyses of precise artworks. This way of looking at things is not an error, but rather an attempt to solve the problem facing art historians when they study “independent” culture and Communist politics in the dynamic context of all European culture.

- 6 With both these extremely significant books, it has, sadly, to be noted that the publisher–L’Harmattan–has not seen fit to include good quality illustrations. In the book dealing with Czech culture, such illustrations as there are nostalgically bring to mind the poor quality publications of the 1950s, while they are altogether absent in the book on Rumanian art. It is not easy to read a book about the visual arts which is illustration-free!